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# TV CAN DERAIL DIPLOMACY

While acknowledging the medium's achievements, this former Secretary of State believes its immaturity hurt his efforts in such places as Argentina and the Middle East

By Alexander M. Haig Jr.

A free press, whether written or electronic, is perhaps the most important safeguard the American people have against rascals, scandal, malfeasance and imprudence. Having said that, however, it is mandatory to add that along with freedom comes responsibility. And here one can sometimes draw a fine line between traditional print and modern television journalism.

The written press has evolved over 200-plus years of our free society and perhaps 1000 more of Anglo-Saxon tradition. Television is a recent development, still undergoing its maturation process in the way it chronicles, editorializes about and interprets events. The print press is largely issue-oriented. Television is not. It tends to be conflict-oriented. Its *modus operandi* is to treat events in a highly

compressed, often quasi-melodramatic way. Indeed, the time limitations of the nightly news programs (all three networks must shoehorn the day's top stories into 22 minutes of broadcast time) virtually guarantee that issues will take second

place to telegenic stories or visually exciting personality clashes that often appear to put national figures at each other's throats. And whereas print journalism is often aimed at small audiences, the networks' nightly news shows reach more than 45 million people. Television's impact is immediate—worldwide, across the Nation and in Washington, D.C.

Indeed, in my experiences as White House Chief of Staff, Deputy National Security Adviser, Commander of NATO and, most recently, Secretary of State, the first order of business every morning was to look at what had been put out on the airwaves the previous night. Because if one failed to do so, it was altogether likely that the rest of the day would be spent trying to clarify a report that was incomplete or misleading. (This is one of the reasons why news management—in the benign, not malignant sense—has become an increasingly time-consuming element of a public official's schedule.)

The dynamics of television, therefore, present unique problems to those of us who have, on occasion, engaged in what has come to be called statecraft. There is seldom a day that we are not affected or influenced by what is broadcast by Dan Rather, Tom Brokaw, Peter Jennings, Ted Koppel and the rest of the broadcast-journalist friars.

During the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, for example, the pictures seen in millions of American houses—including the white one at 1600 Pennsylvania Ave.—profoundly influenced U.S. policy. Those pictures, of Israeli forces pursuing what appeared to be a relentless war against Lebanese and Palestinian civilians as well as the PLO terrorists and their allies, engendered a groundswell of criticism here in the United States against Israel. Why? Because the pictures of air raids, artillery barrages and infantry assaults taken by themselves showed only one element of the war. In its zeal to give viewers the latest news, television overlooked the issues that had brought the conflict on in the first place. Indeed, once the invasion began, it was clearly in the U.S. in-

terest (and the moderate Arabs' interest) to have the Israelis succeed in rooting terrorism out of Lebanon.

But that wasn't the perception if one watched the nightly news. Nor was it seen at the White House, where some of the President's aides, looking at that televised nightly destruction, suggested that Israel was guilty of insensitive—if not worse—actions against innocent civilians, and therefore had to be stopped at any cost. The President was so deeply impressed by what he saw that he phoned Prime Minister Menachem Begin requesting a halt to the bombing—which, in fact, Begin had already ordered stopped several hours before. A photograph of the President making the call ran on the nightly news. Some of Mr. Reagan's closest aides, spurred by what they saw, even insisted on retribution against Israel. Here is a concrete example of how America's foreign policy was directly affected by the pictures that television news brought into our homes night after night.

Television's need to enhance conflict and its never-ending appetite for celebrity newsmakers can also make it a self-serving tool for those who wish to affect the public's perception of our national policy. During the Lebanese crisis I sought to structure a set of pressures on the participants that I believed would lead to agreements by Syria, the PLO and Israel all to withdraw. I enunciated this policy over one week-end. Shortly afterward, Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger, in a television interview, stated that I had not spoken approved policy. Our differences, vented on TV screens, suddenly became more important than America's foreign policy.

Another example took place during the Falklands war, when a Pentagon-generated report aired on ABC's *Nightline*, hinting that the U.S. was supplying "extraordinary intelligence" to the British. That report—seen by the Argentines—undercut the effort I was making in Buenos Aires to resolve the crisis diplomatically. It is no secret that the governments with which we deal all rely on American television for information. If misleading re-

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ports get on the air, at the minimum valuable time is lost by having to backtrack and clarify. Worse, sensitive negotiations can be derailed.

But one sees the same sort of thing today. Secretary of State George Shultz and Secretary Weinberger have differing views on how military force should be applied in counter-terror situations. Their opinions are capsulized by the electronic media into a very sharp disagreement. Certainly, there is a germ of important truth there, but television's tendency toward oversimplification risks turning the disagreement itself into the issue—which it is not. The issue, sadly overlooked, is what the U.S. is going to do to deal with the growing problem of terrorism.

It must be made clear that despite the tendency of television news to concentrate on personalities or to sensationalize some stories, television reporting itself is not completely at fault. One must not slay the messenger because the news is unpleasant. The fact is that those who leak detrimental, dangerous or irresponsible stories are guilty, not those who report the leaks—although one wishes that journalists would more often look into, and report about, their sources' motives.

Another problem caused by television journalism is a byproduct of its immediacy. Diplomacy is a quiet art, pursued far from the spotlight. Television demands not only conflict and controversy, but instantaneous response. Whether one appears on one of the Sunday morning interview shows, or responds to a question shouted in the 10 feet between the door of the sedan and the entrance of the State Department, answers cannot be given frivolously. They require careful thought, measured rhetoric and, above all, knowledge of the facts. No public official likes to admit that he's not on top of the facts, and there is a great temptation to pop off.

Mistakes can have far-reaching effects. During my tenure at State, there was an attempted coup in Madrid. At my morning press briefing I was not in possession of any clear answers. Afterward, I went to a half-hour meeting, after which I was →

again asked by the press about the situation in Spain. I didn't know—having been cooped up for half an hour—but instead of saying precisely that, I told the reporters, "It's too early to say." My remark was immediately interpreted in Spain as a biased position in favor of the abortive military takeover and it took me weeks to clarify what I had said. The lesson: off-the-cuff answers can be costly.

One's appearance and demeanor can also skew reality, as I learned to my dismay as a result of my own brief television appearance in the White House press room the day the President was shot. In my recent book, "Caveat," I have squandered considerable ink in trying to reestablish what constituted reality during those critical hours, and what did not.

Yet television can also be helpful to diplomacy. One can use the airwaves to send messages to both allies and adversaries not through televised speeches—although they are effective—but during interviews or press conferences. Once it became clear what the outcome of the Falklands war would be, and I felt it was time for the British to start thinking about how to bring things to a conclusion, I publicly said that I hoped they would be as generous in victory as they were courageous in battle. They didn't particularly like the message, but they got it.

And often, it is important not only to "do" diplomacy, but to make sure that it is seen being done. Television coverage helps at such times. The Kissinger shuttles of the '70s, President Jimmy Carter's 1979 peace mission to Cairo and Jerusalem to save the Camp David peace process, and my own long flights between London and Buenos Aires are examples of what might be called diplomacy footnoted by the press. We have even hit upon the term "television diplomacy" of late—and there have been cases in which opposing sides use such programs as *Face the Nation*, *This Week with David Brinkley*, *Meet the Press* or *Nightline* to reach both the American people and U.S. officials.

There are, finally, some lessons to be

learned from having lived under the scrutiny of the TV camera's lens for some decades. The first is that you cannot spend all your time managing the press. There are those in the current White House who spend all their time crafting the President's image. But policy cannot be made as a result of popularity polls, and the politician who runs out every day to tell the people what he thinks they want to hear will not only make bad policy, but engage in bad politics. Television captures personalities well—better than it does complicated issues—and it is my opinion that in the long run the American electorate is more impressed by the success quotient of elected officials than it is by any momentary pandering to the public's perceived wishes.

The second lesson is that, sadly, television has a way to go before it covers diplomacy maturely. Television is a personality-oriented craft. Often, those who report are not selected for their analytical ability or their experience but for more evanescent traits: appearance and the ability to speak well are just as important as journalistic ability to the TV-news executives who do the hiring. And the way television covers events, compressing them into a snapshot, often gives viewers a distorted picture of reality.

How should we in Government change these flaws? The answer is: we shouldn't. Nor should we try. Television news ultimately will mature—or the public will not give it credence any more. After all, when the press (just like Government officials) crosses a certain line, it will find that the public rises up and reacts against it. It is no accident that there is a spate of libel suits against news organizations these days. I happen to think they're probably healthy. And it's no accident that television is viewed today with some suspicion by many Americans, in terms of its objectivity and its reporting.

That, indeed, is what is most healthy about our system of a free and unencumbered press: the system is self-correcting. Correction sometimes comes at great cost, but it will be, in the end, inevitable. (END)